



WELLSPRING

# **TARNATION**

A Film by Jonathan Caouette

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS

Gus Van Sant  
John Cameron Mitchell

PRODUCER

Stephen Winter

A Wellspring Release in association with Nightlight Films

88 Minutes (Unrated)

USA, 2004

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# TARNATION

Jonathan Caouette's spellbinding debut **TARNATION** reimagines the whole idea of what a documentary can be.

Caouette has been documenting his life since he was eleven years old. With **TARNATION**, he weaves a psychedelic whirlwind of snapshots, Super-8 home movies, answering machine messages, video diaries, early short films, snippets of 80s pop culture and dramatic reenactments to create an epic portrait of an American family torn apart by dysfunction and reunited through the power of love.

**TARNATION** begins in 2003 as Caouette learns of his mother's lithium overdose in his native Texas. Faced with the haunting remnants of his past, including a family legacy of mental illness, abuse, and neglect, Caouette returns home to aid in his mother's recovery. Slipping back into the archives of his youth, we watch Caouette grow up on camera, seeking escape from family trauma through musical theater, grade-B horror flicks and the forging of his identity through popular culture.

Having relocated to New York in his twenties and subsequently attaining peace in the form of a supportive mate, Caouette discovers that family ties are never truly unbound. He rekindles a touching relationship with another victim of a tumultuous childhood - his own mother Renee.

**TARNATION** is a raw and sensual display of self-destruction and rebirth that announces the arrival of an exceptional new cinematic visionary.

# FULL SYNOPSIS

**TARNATION** is thirty-one year old director Jonathan Caouette's inspiring documentary self-portrait, chronicling his chaotic upbringing in a dysfunctional Texas family and the unexpected relationship that develops with his mentally-ill mother Renee.

The film begins with the early history of Caouette's family. His grandparents, Adolph and Rosemary, were married in 1951 and experienced a middle-class life in a Houston suburb. But their idyllic early years quickly disintegrate after they opt to incarcerate their beauty-queen daughter Renee, who undergoes shock therapy after a suspected mental condition is diagnosed. Renee's personality is severely compromised after two years of treatment, resulting in a tortured life of mental illness, physical abuse, and a seemingly endless series of hospitalizations. Her saving grace arrives in the form of her son, Jonathan, born in 1972.

As Jonathan grows up on camera over a two-decade span, he forges an unbreakable, often heartbreaking bond with Renee, discovering along the way his own personal difficulty - depersonalization, an affliction involving feelings of detachment from one's own body or thoughts. Using filmmaking and self-documentation as a means of escape and salvation, Jonathan eludes his harsh existence through the safe, controlled world of cinema and make-believe. He becomes enthralled with underground movies, musical theatre and alternative gay culture, and yearns for the day when he can escape Texas and make a life of his own. As a young adult Jonathan migrates to New York City and finds a secure, loving home with boyfriend David Sanin Paz. His relationship with Renee grows even deeper after a lithium overdose requires sacrifice, compassion and an outpouring of love.

Included in **TARNATION** are fragments from Caouette's personal collection of photographs, home movies, audio recordings, video diaries, answering machine messages, Hollywood movie clips, pop music samples and excerpts from his own short films. While undeniably a documentary at heart, **TARNATION** mines a greater terrain, serving up a history of late twentieth century popular culture and family life that plays out like a collective fever dream. Caouette's devastating yet hopeful vision becomes a haunting and beautiful examination of the restless soul of America.

# THE STORY OF TARNATION

## *In the beginning*

At the age of eleven, **TARNATION** director Jonathan Caouette borrowed a neighbor's video camera and began documenting his daily life, interrogating his family members and making short films to escape the drama of his everyday existence. Caouette utilized six different cameras over the years, including Super-8, Betamax, VHS, Hi-8 and Mini-DV, with which he shot the bulk of the footage that appears in **TARNATION**. In addition, he compiled still photographs, archived answering machine messages and audiocassette diaries - all of which documented the details of his tumultuous life. As a self-proclaimed pack rat, Caouette saved what turned out to be 160 hours of personal recorded materials in a wide range of different video and audio formats, spanning over twenty years. When considered as a whole, these materials offer a devastating, yet mesmerizing portrait of a troubled American family. The footage includes unsettling domestic situations, unique dramatic performances (by a pre-teen Caouette and his mother) and unexpected demonstrations of compassion and love that could only be called unconditional.

## *The evolution of a filmmaker*

Almost 20 years after shooting his first footage, Caouette began using the editing software iMovie while working on his short film "The Hospital." The program came bundled with his boyfriend's Apple computer and was "as easy to learn as riding a bike," according to Caouette. In "The Hospital," a young man with a troubled childhood remembers details from his brutal past while incarcerated in a psychiatric hospital. Although the film's story is fictitious, the young man's memories are depicted in flashback sequences constructed from actual footage of Caouette's childhood.

While crafting these initial montages, Caouette had no intention of making a feature documentary about his life and family. But excited by the possibilities of iMovie and driven by a powerful, almost insatiable need to tell his life story, Caouette began loosely compiling and editing his archived audio and video material as a separate experiment. In early 2003, Caouette auditioned for a part in **HEDWIG & THE ANGRY INCH** director John Cameron Mitchell's new film **SHORTBUS**. For his audition tape, Caouette included excerpts from his work-in-progress.

Impressed with the unfinished work, Mitchell encouraged Jonathan to finish his film. Soon after, Caouette learned Renee had suffered brain damage from a lithium overdose. After returning to Houston for five months with the intention of perhaps bringing his mother back to live with him in New York, Caouette turned to his camera and his home editing suite to help fully confront the legacy of his past. Returning to New York, Caouette discovered that the deadline for the MIX Film Festival was in less than four weeks, so he feverishly reworked his materials, increasing the scope of his project, to include more recent footage and a substantial narrative overhaul of the existing material.

For Caouette, editing **TARNATION** together and building the story was an organic stream-of-consciousness process. He would randomly review whatever material seemed interesting, import it, and start editing. None of his footage was logged or labeled. According to Caouette, "I would look at some footage and think 'this is from 1983 or so when I was doing such and such. Don't I have some other stuff from that time on a VHS tape somewhere?'" The material he began to add included movie clips, pop songs, and odds and ends like scenes from the 1970's children's television show "Zoom." He would pull music CD's off the shelf and incorporate a favorite song into the work. He also began structuring the film around his depersonalization disorder, intending to portray reality as conflicted and unreliable. As Caouette describes it, "I conceived the film as a new way of looking at documentary, as though it were imitating my thought process, giving the audience the experience of seeing what it was like to be inside my head."

From this, **TARNATION** was born. With the MIX Festival deadline as a motivating force, Caouette embarked on an intense three-week editing marathon. What began as a stroll down memory lane soon evolved into a two and a half hour rough-cut that had all the resonance of an epic documentary. This cut explored Caouette's personal trajectory while also paying tribute to his long-suffering mother. After viewing a rough cut, John Cameron Mitchell expressed his approval: "I was incredibly moved by the unbreakable bond of love between Jonathan and his mother. It kept them both alive."

### *The road to Sundance and beyond*

Caouette completed **TARNATION** just prior to the MIX deadline (total budget: \$218.32) and rushed it to Festival Director Stephen Winter's office with seconds to spare. Winter was so moved after his first viewing of the film that he immediately called Caouette at home to congratulate him and schedule a meeting. Winter recalls, "Watching the original three-hour cut of **TARNATION** was like learning how to see for the first time. It was an absolutely mind-blowing and cataclysmic experience." A seasoned writer, producer and director of independent film and reality television, Winter encouraged Caouette to continue editing down the film for its premiere at MIX. Shortly thereafter he signed on as the film's producer.

Winter then passed the two and a half-hour version of **TARNATION** back to John Cameron Mitchell, who was elated with the results. For Mitchell, the film was “a fascinating mixture of documentary, memoir and raw mind tissue, making for one of the most original and moving new films I had seen in years.” Mitchell signed on as executive producer and forwarded the tape to director Gus Van Sant, who also loved the film, proclaiming it “a brilliant and devastating autobiographical documentary.” He also promptly signed on as an executive producer.

In late 2003, Caouette received the news that **TARNATION** had been selected for the 2004 Sundance Film Festival after programmers had viewed the rough cut at the last minute. It was to be featured in the Festival’s Frontier program, a showcase for experimental filmmakers who push the boundaries of cinematic possibility.

Now under more pressure than ever, Caouette worked closely with Winter, Mitchell and co-editor Brian A. Kates to complete the 88-minute final version of **TARNATION** that screened at Sundance. He completed the task in three weeks.

**TARNATION** was greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm at Sundance and has since been embraced by festival programmers, audiences and critics the world over. In late April, film critic Roger Ebert introduced the film enthusiastically at his EbertFest in Illinois. Ebert told a Thursday afternoon audience of over 1000 that “a lot will be made of **TARNATION**’s miniscule budget, but don’t get too caught up in that obvious talking point. The reason I chose this film for the Fest is not because of its landmark budget, but because it’s a great film - period.”

# THE NEW FACE OF DOCUMENTARY

In **TARNATION**, Caouette reconstructs a large portion of his family history through the use of existing home movie footage. In the context of the film, this footage transcends its traditional archival and sentimental functions and becomes compelling documentary material in its own right as therapeutic for the audience as it is for the filmmaker. As Executive Producer Gus Van Sant notes, "They are no longer home movies, but movies of the home." Like **CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS** before it, **TARNATION** re-examines and recombines existing footage in order to arrive at a greater truth about the nature and dynamics of the American family unit. Through the prism of time and distance, the pain and suffering of the past become cathartic for both filmmaker and audience. It's a cinematic memoir that is at once personal and public; the collective experience of a generation transformed by cheap and easy access to video cameras, cassettes and players. Caouette's powerful and disparate use of found footage evokes a contemporary cinematic collective unconscious through the manipulation of film clips, pop songs and cultural moments that are Caouette's as much as our own. **TARNATION** suggests a new era for movies, moviemakers and audiences - a revolution in audio-visual confessional.

# DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS

I was born and raised in Houston, Texas, where I grew up mostly with my grandparents while my mother Renee was in and out of hospitals dealing with her mental illness. I also spent time in the foster care system, where I experienced a great deal of neglect and abuse.

Filmmaking for me became a means of disassociation and escape. By picking up a camera when I was a kid, I found a way to survive the life I was enduring. I used the camera as a weapon, a shield and a way to illuminate how I was feeling about everything. Filming things was a way of talking to myself. When I was 8, other kids were outside playing football or hackey-sack; I was inside writing a rock opera or storyboarding a movie I had just seen. My idea of a good time was sticking a camera in my grandma's face and asking her about her life.

**TARNATION** is a film about youth, art, sexuality, mental illness, America and survival. It's also a love letter to my mother Renee, and to all mothers everywhere.

Everything in **TARNATION** is true. My mother Renee was diagnosed with acute bipolar disorder and schizoaffective disorder, and is a survivor of the sometimes primitive mental health institutions of Texas in the 1960s and 1970s. I do have depersonalization disorder, which is defined as a feeling of disconnection from the body and a constant sense of unreality. They don't really have a cure for this disorder, so it's something I have learned to live with. **TARNATION** is designed to mimic my thought processes so the audience can also feel like they're in a living dream, which can be scary and intense, but also beautiful and glorious. **TARNATION** is a documentary in the sense that it's a true story but it's also a happening, an encounter, and a way for you to meet me and for me to meet you.

I love so many films and filmmakers that it's hard to single out a few, but I'm especially inspired by the work of Alejandro Jodorowsky, John Cassavetes, Lars Von Trier, William Friedkin, Paul Morrissey, John Boorman, David Lynch, Sidney Lumet, Michael Moore, Albert Maysles and so many others! I'm a big collector of movies, music, and other madness. At last count, I have 1,349 films on VHS, betamax and 16mm, and 2,046 LP's and CD's.

I believe **TARNATION** is the first feature film ever seen on a festival screen that was created solely on Apple's iMovie program (including picture edit, effects/timing, sound edit and mix.) Boy, has that been a challenge! My boyfriend's aunt Vicky gave him a computer last year, and I taught myself iMovie on it at night. By day, I was a doorman for a 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue jewelry shop a job that I recently had to quit to finish the film. I hope they hire me back -- they had a good health plan.

## Q&A WITH DIRECTOR JONATHAN CAOQUETTE

*In **TARNATION**, we see that you have been making films and shooting home movie/documentary footage since you were at least 11 years old. When and how did you obtain your first camera and how did you come to start using it - as you describe it – “as a weapon, a shield and a way to illuminate?”*

I've loved films since age four, and have been shooting them since I was eleven, but it was never just for fun. Filming things had a critical life-and-death purpose. It was always a defense mechanism and a way to have a sense of control over my life. Filming was also a way to control and defend myself against my environment and disassociate myself from the horrors around me. I've wanted to be a filmmaker since I can remember, and filmmaking definitely saved my life. If I didn't have to eat and sleep and occasionally walk the dog, I would work on movies all day and all night. Stories and ideas race through my head all day. As I take the train into Manhattan with my headphones on, I can see epic mythologies etched on every face in the subway car.

*Since its completion, **TARNATION** has received an overwhelmingly positive response from critics and festival programmers and audiences. What is your take on the response it has received?*

To me, the response **TARNATION** has had with audiences is both supernatural and miraculous. Miracle is a word I rarely use, but when you consider what I've been through in life and how last year at this time I was a doorman at a Fifth Avenue jewelry store, this all feels like an absolute miracle. As to audience response, people would come up to me at Sundance without saying a word and just embrace me tightly. People seem to connect with this movie in an astoundingly real and visceral way. It is very rare to see people connect in general, and for an audience to collectively come to emotional catharsis through watching **TARNATION** is humbling and overwhelming. After watching the film, people have told me their own amazingly personal stories of dealing with mental illness or depression, or about someone in their own family who overdosed on lithium or PCP, and we share that experience of survival. I had what I knew was an important story to tell and I'm grateful it's getting out there. I also want people to understand and empathize with mentally-ill people.

*Though you did not attend film school or formally study film, you seem to have a very strong knowledge of the medium and have clearly seen many films. How did you first become interested in film?*

I don't remember ever NOT wanting to be a filmmaker! Even when I was four or five, I used to escape to the backyard to get away from all the grown-ups. I would tell them, "I am doing this movie," or, "I am going to go do a movie," and then prance around the backyard while reciting a completely improvised script in my mind. As I got a bit older and began learning my neighborhood, I turned my entire suburban neighborhood into a giant sound stage and I would "do this movie." I would do horror films, rock operas, and serious dramatizations. I talked and sang to myself. Sometimes I even went to the extent of pretending to be one of the characters in my films and incorporating people from around the neighborhood who had no idea that they were inadvertently part of one of these movies happening in my mind.

I once walked up to a group of kids in the neighborhood just next to mine. I pretended to be mute and a little slow. I spent the whole day with these kids, managed to meet one of the kids' parents, and actually ATE DINNER with them, without saying one word. Needless to say, I never saw these people again. But that was my idea of a good time. There was also a period in my childhood, pre-VCR, when I would go see a movie with my grandfather and record the audio from the film on a tape recorder. I would then go home, and on loose-leaf or typing paper, with a mound of markers, would literally draw out the entire film frame-by-frame. Some of the films I drew were THE WIZ, WILLY WONKA AND THE CHOCOLATE FACTORY, THE EXORCIST ONE and TWO (from TV at the time), and PHANTASM.

At one point, I even ran a film program in my grandparents' house where I grew up. I actually built a home theater before home theaters were in vogue. My theater was fully equipped with a 4-tier seating arrangement with an actual projection booth. I built it in our attic, which had previously been converted into a bedroom. I showed 16mm greats like THE 5000 FINGERS OF DR. T and PHANTOM OF THE PARADISE. I usually borrowed the films from our local Houston Downtown Library. I also projected my own super-8 films that I had made over the years. Eventually, I saved enough money to purchase one of those archaic 3-color-light dinosaur video projectors to show my betamax and VHS tapes on. No one really has guided me in any direction. I literally raised - and film-schooled - myself.

*Were there any particular people that guided you in the right direction?*

One of the larger inspirations of my life came when I was twelve years old. I got involved with Houston's Big Brothers Big Sisters Association of America and was fortunate enough to be matched with Jeff Millar, the film critic for the Houston Chronicle. Since I was a big film freak, it was a perfect match and much better than the dude I had at first, who kept trying to "make a man of me" by taking me to endless baseball games. Over the next four years, Jeff would take me to pre-screenings of films he had to review like *MOONSTRUCK* or *AU REVOIR, LES ENFANTS*. Afterwards, we would go to dinner and break the film down together. We would have very intricate conversations dissecting the plot, and the artistic pros and cons of film in a real detailed "Siskel and Ebert" kind of way. I was very lucky to find an adult who took my love for film seriously and would engage me intellectually about it.

*In addition to making your own movies, watching movies and listening to music were obviously very important to you as you were growing up. In **TARNATION**, you use many of the films and songs that were a part of your childhood as metaphors for your personal experiences and feelings. What was the selection process like for these materials?*

Creating **TARNATION** was a completely intuitive process. By random chance I would come upon a song like Wichita Lineman and think, "Wow, that reminds me of being five years old, laying in the backseat of that huge car my grandpa drove, with my head on the cardboard of the speaker, dozing slightly, and it was raining at sundown and the other cars were whizzing by and I can just taste the car door and remember how that felt like going home to Houston from Galveston." That's why I chose that song for that section of the film.

*Are there any documentaries that particularly influenced you?*

Some of my favorites are *HELL HOUSE* (George Ratliff, 2001), *BROTHER'S KEEPER* (Joe Berlinger & Bruce Sinofsky, 1992), *STREETWISE* (Martin Bell, 1984), *KOYAANISQATSI* (Godfrey Reggio, 1983), *GREY GARDENS* (Maysles Bros., 1975), *CRUMB* (Terry Zwigoff, 1994), *WOODSTOCK* (Michael Wadleigh, 1970) and *ROGER & ME* (Michael Moore, 1989).

*In general, documentary filmmaking seems to be rapidly evolving and shifting shape, as can be seen with recent films like *BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE*, *CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS* and your film **TARNATION**. How do you think documentaries are changing and what do you think the future holds for documentary cinema?*

I think through the proliferation of new, easy and inexpensive technology there is going to be a revolution in the way films are made, seen and appreciated. I think people and

subjects that have never been explored before will be made by filmmakers who wouldn't normally be able to tell their stories. I think new technology will enable people who have never had a voice to make themselves heard. I recently saw a wonderful documentary about the great African-American actress Beah Richards, in which most of the footage was shot with a home video camera by another actress who Beah had met while working on a TV show. Essentially, this documentary was comprised of one woman shooting home video footage of another woman. It was very intimate - one friend to another - and it was incredible. I love the idea of anybody in the world being able to pick up an inexpensive cameras and editing software to tell their own story.

*There is a reference to MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO in **TARNATION**. Can you talk about how Gus Van Sant influenced you? Did you know him before going into **TARNATION** or did the film bring you together? What about John Cameron Mitchell?*

I was introduced to Gus Van Sant's work for the very first time when I laid eyes on MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO. I was mesmerized by the fact that someone had honed in on a specific kind of gay street kid culture that I was actually a part of. The film came out when I was sixteen, during a period in my life when I thought that I was the only one in the universe who knew about kids like this. There was something about seeing these beautifully troubled kids who happened to be gay, yet whose identity didn't revolve around that fact, that reminded me so much of myself. I have never been able to quite put my finger on it but Gus' films touch me on an almost psychic sort of familiar level. I did not know Gus before **TARNATION** happened. The film just magically brought so many wonderful situations and people together all at once. I met John Cameron Mitchell when I auditioned for his new film, and it was he and Stephen Winter who brought it to Gus Van Sant. When Gus and John signed on as executive producers, it was the most thrilling moment of my life.

*One of the most striking elements of **TARNATION** is that you managed to survive a very tumultuous early life with a surprising supply of optimism and unconditional love, particularly for your mother Renee. Has Renee seen the film? If so, what was her response?*

Renee loves **TARNATION**. She loves that her story is getting out there. Being able to tell my mother's story and avenge the terrible wrongs she's experienced is probably the most wonderful and satisfying thing to have come out of all of this. For the record, Renee is not schizophrenic. She has been diagnosed with acute bipolar disorder and schizoaffective disorder, which is an overlap of schizophrenia and manic depression. In other words, Renee's condition can encompass some symptoms of schizophrenia including mania and depression but is not schizophrenia proper. She has survived and overcome her terrible and tumultuous psychological past. Her condition, although not gone, is in remission. Renee is currently a very happy and functional person who leads a normal life. Like everyone else she has good days, bad days and days in between, but we have an amazing relationship that grows every day, and despite the chaos of

life, our bond of love has never been stronger. I think everybody in my family is loving. Although our circumstances were chaotic, crazy and emotionally abusive on all levels, there was never a moment of doubt in my mind that my family loved each other and me.

*Can you talk about your personal experience with depersonalization and how it affected the filmmaking process for **TARNATION**?*

Living with depersonalization is like constantly adjusting to a pair of glasses with the wrong prescription. Because I have to spend so much mental energy focusing on being in the moment, I tend to live life in a very existential way. If I'm talking with a friend, I sometimes have to think to myself, "I am talking to my friend. This is what I am doing," or I'll start to question if this is real or a dream. The flip side of this is that because I am so hyper-aware of mortality and reality, I really appreciate and adore everything I experience and the people in my life. I love my mother and my boyfriend, my friends and my dog, and everything so, so much < so much that it hurts. When I make films, I really want audience members to feel like they are peeking in on something different and intense and glorious and real. Life is just too beautiful to live in any other way.

***TARNATION** started out as an intimately personal project - and in some ways, a form of catharsis. Was creating the film a form of a personal healing?*

The process of bringing **TARNATION** from my head, to iMovie, to Sundance and now Cannes has been the most cathartic, therapeutic, frightening and bloodcurdling experience of my life. Putting yourself out there like this is scary and exciting, but it has definitely healed me and seems to heal others as well, so all the pain I went through to get there is worth it.

# ABOUT iMovie EDITING SOFTWARE

**TARNATION** was edited entirely on Apple's iMovie editing software. Included free with basic system software on most Macintosh computers, iMovie allows even the least computer-savvy consumers a simple means to edit their own materials into movies using their personal computers. Since its introduction in 1999, iMovie has evolved into a comprehensive editing suite for aspiring moviemakers, with the capability to edit image, mix sound, add effects and filters, generate titles and create DVD's.

By film industry standards, iMovie is a very basic program best suited for nonprofessionals learning to edit home movie footage. However, because of its affordability, accessibility and simple interface, many beginning digital filmmakers, of all ages, turn to iMovie to edit their projects.

Producer Stephen Winter says of its potential, "I hope **TARNATION** will usher in new respect and excitement for do-it-yourself filmmaking, and the entertainment industry will pay more attention to potent but unproven talents. There are plenty of driven, talented people who are trying to get their voices heard and can now use inexpensive, home computer systems to create their work."

Executive Producer John Cameron Mitchell agrees, "I really believe that **TARNATION** is exactly the kind of film that new, accessible technology has been promising us for a long time now the first cinematic masterpiece of outsider art. The creation of music, writing and visual art have always been available to most people, and now cinema is just as possible."

Upon viewing the completed work, Executive Producer Gus Van Sant remarked, "Jonathan Caouette used a very basic and available technical system, iMovie, to create something that is on par with and surpasses some of the best documentaries I have seen. I think I have always been waiting to see someone make something as moving as Jonathan's film with as little as he has had to make it. I knew something like this would appear, and I am glad that it finally has."

# FILMMAKER BIOGRAPHIES

## Jonathan Caouette // Director, Writer & Editor

Jonathan Caouette has been making films since he was 8 years old. His shorts include "The Ankle Slasher" (1987), "The Techniques and Science of Eva" (1988), "Pig Nymph" (1990), "The Hospital" (2001), and "Fame" (2002). As a regional theater actor, Jonathan has appeared as a schizophrenic John the Baptist in Salome, a queer Judas in Jesus Christ Superstar, and both John the Baptist and Judas in Godspell. He has toured with the European company of The Rocky Horror Show, and has appeared in eight commercials, eleven MTV spots and seventeen student films. Jonathan presently lives in Queens with his partner David Sanin Paz and his mother Renee LeBlanc.

## Gus Van Sant // Executive Producer

Gus Van Sant is one of independent film's most influential voices. His debut feature MALA NOCHE (1986) gained much critical praise; his follow-up, DRUGSTORE COWBOY (1989), won Best Picture and Director citations from the National Society of Film Critics. As a director, Van Sant's films include MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO (1991), TO DIE FOR (1995), GOOD WILL HUNTING (1997), FINDING FORRESTER (2000), GERRY (2002) and the Palme d'Or-winning ELEPHANT (2003). He is also the executive producer of KIDS (1995). He lives in Portland, Oregon.

## John Cameron Mitchell // Executive Producer

John Cameron Mitchell's debut film HEDWIG & THE ANGRY INCH won both the Audience Award and Best Director Award at the 2001 Sundance Film Festival, then went on to win countless best feature and best actor honors across the world including a Golden Globe nomination for Best Actor. As a New York theater actor, John received two Obie Awards, one for the stage version of "Hedwig" and the other for "The Destiny Of Me", plus five Drama Desk nominations for "Hedwig", "The Destiny Of Me", "The Secret Garden", "Six Degrees of Separation" and "Hello Again". He recently completed a screenplay for an animated children's feature, NIGH, and is working on a new film, created through improvisation, tentatively entitled SHORTBUS.

## Stephen Winter // Producer

As a director, writer, producer and editor, Stephen's accomplishments include the award-winning feature film CHOCOLATE BABIES (1997, Water Bearer/Frameline), the documentary PRIVATE SHOWS (1996), and the short films "Here Be Dragons" (1993) and "Huge" (2000). Stephen wrote an original musical screenplay, DONKEY SKIN, for Macy Gray and producer Lee Daniels (MONSTER\_S BALL). He is the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation Media Arts Fellowship for two separate projects a screenplay, WHITE BOY BLUES, in development with Process Media; and BROOKLYN ORPHEUS, in development with Process Media; and BROOKLYN ORPHEUS, in development with Maverick Entertainment. Stephen has also produced projects for Lifetime, VH1, and the BBC. Stephen earned his MFA from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, and his BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

## Brian A. Kates // Co-Editor

Brian Kates' is currently editing George C. Wolfe's film directorial debut LACKAWANNA BLUES for HBO. Brian's most recent film THE WOODSMAN, written and directed by Nicole Kassell, produced by Lee Daniels (MONSTER'S BALL) and starring Kevin Bacon, Kyra Sedgwick, Mos Def and Eve, premiered at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. Brian has edited numerous feature films and videos including HBO's THE LARAMIE PROJECT (Moises Kaufman), JAILS, HOSPITALS & HIP-HOP (Danny Hoch; Mark Benjamin), TRICK (Jim Fall), and the award-winning short film "Tree Shade" (Lisa Collins), which won the Student Academy Award. He was the associate editor of SPRING FORWARD (Tom Gilroy). His post-production supervisor credits include GIRLS TOWN (Jim McKay) and SAFE (Todd Haynes). His television editing credits include the MTV promo "Orange" (w/ Michael Stipe), as well as documentary pieces for PBS ("The Joseph Papp Project"), The Oxygen Network, and producer Marlo Thomas' documentary special for Lifetime entitled "A Few Good Women." Brian studied film production and Judaic Studies at New York University.

# CAST AND CREW

## PRINCIPAL CAST

Jonathan..... Jonathan Caouette  
Renee..... Renee LeBlanc  
David..... David Sanin Paz  
Rosemary..... Rosemary Davis  
Adolph..... Adolph Davis

## CREW

Director and Writer..... Jonathan Caouette  
Executive Producer..... Gus Van Sant  
Executive Producer..... John Cameron Mitchell  
Producer..... Stephen Winter  
Associate Producer..... Jason Banker  
Editor..... Jonathan Caouette  
Co-Editor..... Brian A. Kates

## ROGER EBERT ON TARNATION

The makers of low-budget films are wisely advised to be quiet about their budgets, and focus on their work. That a film didn't cost much is fascinating to Sundance audiences, but not an advantage in talking to distributors or promoting to audiences. I remember one hapless indie filmmaker who brought his new title to the Chicago Film Festival and gave a long introductory speech about how little it cost; after seeing it, Gene Siskel told him, "I only wish you had been able to find more money."

But see how I have started my discussion of Jonathan Caouette's remarkable **TARNATION** with a discussion of its budget, which became famous at Sundance this year because it was—well, \$187. (Of course that does not include post-production and prints, but it presumably represents the real cost of assembling the archival materials, shooting the new scenes, editing the film with iMovie on a Macintosh and burning it onto a DVD.) This film proves, as Richard Linklater's *WAKING LIFE* did on a larger but still remarkable budget, that films deserving theatrical release are now within the means of filmmakers with the necessary skill and imagination.

So now that we have that out of the way, let me simply add that **TARNATION** has not been invited to the EbertFest because of its cost, but because of its achievement. This is a powerful and heartbreaking film about three generations of a family in crisis, and Caouette shows himself to be a documentarian of rare skill in the way he uses his materials. He begins with old photographs, family movies, answering machine messages, his own first films, and his memories. He adds new video footage of his more recent life. And he organizes this material in a collage that envelops us in his family story.

Some things in his past are certainly true. We follow the early life of his mother, a beautiful young woman who was a model before she suffered a catastrophic accident which led to still more damaging shock treatments—a therapy which apparently contributed to a lifelong mental illness. We sense Caouette's love and pain for his mother, and his ambivalence toward his grandfather, who is blamed by the mother for many sins, although we cannot be sure that everything is true. We follow the filmmaker's own personal journey as he discovers he is gay, moves to New York, and then sends for his mother, hoping somehow to reestablish the family that was shattered. And then we follow the consequences of his decision.

Like many family stories, the one in **TARNATION** has more than one version and probably more than one truth, and the bravest thing Caouette does is to acknowledge that. What the audience gets is essentially what he has gathered from his life, his family history, the stories he has heard, the events he has witnessed or guessed about. Narration and subtitles help orient us throughout the story, but they also provide a certain ironic distance. There is a disconnect between a subtitle flatly identifying an event, and the ambiguity of the event itself.

One can imagine this movie as a jumbled scrapbook. Instead, using video editing techniques and special effects, he makes it into more of a poem or a song, into a meditation. At the end we feel we have witnessed what he experienced, and what he survived, and we feel pity for his family but hope for his future.

This kind of intensely personal and subjective autobiographical filmmaking has always been there at the fringes of the cinema (one thinks of Stan Brakhage), but new computer, video and editing tools now bring it toward general audiences. When the Oscar-nominated documentary **CAPTURING THE FRIEDMANS** played at Sundance 2003, it was observed by many critics that documentaries of the future would be substantially different because so much home video footage is now available; hours and hours of it, instead of a few fugitive minutes from an old hand-wound 8mm movie camera. **TARNATION** is a moving and technically impressive work by a filmmaker assembling his story through the consideration of a lifetime of memories in many different forms.

## REVIEWS AND CRITICAL RESPONSES

"Remarkable. **TARNATION** is a powerful and heartbreaking film. Caouette shows himself to be a documentarian of rare skill." – Roger Ebert

"I feel transcendence in reality, watching **TARNATION**, in which Jonathan Caouette takes a deathless swan dive into the fractured memories of his strange, tormented, beautiful life..." – Owen Gleiberman, *Entertainment Weekly*

"An exuberantly personal work smeared with lipstick traces from the likes of David Lynch and avant-garde legend Jack Smith that recounts the filmmaker's life with and without his disturbed mother." – Manohla Dargis, *LA Times*

"A whirlwind journey through filmmaker Jonathan Caouette's Southern Gothic life. Painfully self-revealing but never self-indulgent. **TARNATION** ultimately coheres into a remarkable affirmation of a son's enduring love for his broken mother." – David Ansen, *Newsweek*

"Always compelling. A swirling digital vortex to chronicle its maker's passage from childhood turmoil and teenage acting out to eventual psychic survival. The video has a directness and a wrenching emotional force. You know the filmmaker means every frame and that his very identity is on the line." – Gavin Smith, *Film Comment*

"Once in a blue moon, a picture shows up at a festival that busts our ways of looking at cinema wide open. That this should happen this year at Sundance, and – get this – by way of a young somebody's first feature - is something of a miracle. **TARNATION** is a fever dream of sorts. It crosses and re-crosses the line between high art and bad acid trip, between sordid confession and life-affirming revelation, so many times that those distinctions soon cease to matter." – Ron Stringer, *LA Weekly* (Film Editor)

"An electrifying first film. **TARNATION** is a mesmerizing rock-and-read memoir." – Jan Stuart, *Newsday*

"A flat-out masterpiece. **TARNATION** is the cinematic shit." – Tim Appelo, *Seattle Weekly* (Film Editor)

"Jonathan Caouette's brutal and spellbinding debut is breathtaking and establishes Caouette as a cinematic visionary to reckon with. A dazzling display of energy and visual splendor, **TARNATION** is a raw and sensual masterpiece." – Shari Frilot, Sundance Film Festival Programmer

## ABOUT WELLSPRING

Current and upcoming **Wellspring** theatrical releases include Jean-François Pouliot's Sundance Audience Award-winner *Seducing Doctor Lewis*, Jonathan Caouette's groundbreaking debut film *Tarnation*, Vincent Gallo's controversial *The Brown Bunny* starring Gallo and Chloé Sevigny, André Téchiné's World War II drama *Strayed* starring Emmanuelle Béart, Alexander Sokurov's Cannes prize-winner *Father and Son*, Cedric Kahn's thriller *Red Lights* starring Jean-Pierre Darroussin and Carole Bouquet, Marco Bellocchio's Venice prize-winner *Good Morning, Night*, Savi Gabizon's *Nina's Tragedies* which won 11 Israeli academy awards, and Anne Fontaine's erotic love story *Nathalie*, starring Gerard Depardieu, Fanny Ardant and Emmanuelle Béart.

Past releases include some of the most acclaimed and successful arthouse films of recent years such as *Russian Ark*, hailed by Roger Ebert as "one of the most astonishing films ever made.," Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece *Ran*, *The Circle* by Jafar Panahi, *Yi Yi* by Edward Yang, *Under the Sand* by François Ozon and Lorene Machado's *Notorious C.H.O.* **Wellspring** has fostered the careers of some of the most important directors in world cinema today including Bruno Dumont (*Life of Jesus, Humanité, Twentynine Palms*), Alexander Sokurov (*Russian Ark, Father and Son*) Jafar Panahi (*The Circle, Crimson Gold*), Leos Carax (*Mauvais Sang, Pola X*), Tsai Ming-liang (*What Time is It There? Goodbye Dragon Inn*), Olivier Assayas (*Les Destinées*), Claire Denis (*Friday Night*), Bahman Ghobadi (*Marooned in Iraq*), Liz Garbus (*Girlhood*), Marina de Van (*In My Skin*) and Karim Ainouz (*Madame Satã*). **Wellspring** has also been committed to the theatrical re-release of classic films including the works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Demy and François Truffaut.

Together, the **Wellspring** Home Entertainment and Worldwide Sales libraries boast over 1,000 titles including major works by François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Luchino Visconti, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Taviani Brothers, Peter Greenaway, Jacques Demy, Akira Kurosawa, Pedro Almodóvar, Michelangelo Antonioni and Lina Wertmüller among others.

**Wellspring's** Direct Response unit sells arthouse and specialty video/DVD titles via **The Video Collection** and the **artfilm collection** direct mail consumer catalogs and websites, [www.videocollection.com](http://www.videocollection.com) and [www.artfilmcollection.com](http://www.artfilmcollection.com).

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